

Healthy Planet, Healthy People – Reflections on a United Nations Association WebTalk

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On May 11, 2020, the United Nations Association New York hosted a WebTalk as part of their online webinar series. On this edition, Inger Andersen, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), talked about “Healthy People and Planet - Why Sustaining All Life Matters in a Post-Covid World”. She thus chose a topic highlighting once more how intertwined health and environmental issues are and that they need to be tackled together. The talk was moderated by Reem Abaza, Spokesperson for the President of the UN General Assembly.

In her vivid talk, Ms Andersen demonstrated that even if the world faces profound economic and social consequences as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, now is not the time to give up on climate change. The pandemic, she pointed out, has made a sustainable systemic shift even more crucial as it clearly shows that humankind cannot continue on the current track of exploiting the environment. Andersen stated that there is a limit to how far we can “push nature into a corner”, as these days there exist more opportunities than ever for pathogens to pass from animals to people. With evolving climate change and the melting of the permafrost, even more viruses will be released, and diseases believed extinct will reappear. Evidence is also emerging that the greater the loss of biodiversity, the greater the zoonotic pathogen transfer.

As a central point of her talk Andersen underlined that the current recoveries observed in nature are only temporary and should therefore not be seen as a victory for environmentalism. On the contrary, the current pandemic poses an additional

threat to the environment, for example by the huge number of single-use items that are produced (e.g. face masks). Additionally, the economic crisis might lead to an unsustainable re-establishment of the economy. According to Andersen, the solution should lie in a switch to green technology. This can be best implemented in the areas of energy production, transport, and housing. Only in this way can emissions and pollution be lastingly reduced while at the same time re-establishing the economy.

Still, Ms Andersen concluded with a positive outlook. The Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to bring home to the public that humans have a vital impact on environment and climate. This impact, however, bears not only responsibilities but also a huge chance for a sustainable change towards a healthy planet and healthy people. The pandemic has already shown that listening to science is an essential prerequisite for tackling global challenges, and that we as scientists should raise our voices and participate in public debates to make sure that scientific knowledge is implemented in the general interest.



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